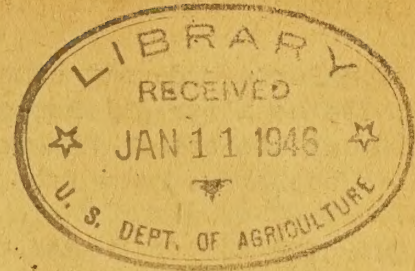


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A SEWING-MACHINE CLINIC
(An Extension Case History*)

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The Background

American women like nice clothes. Whether they come from the farm or the city, they like to feel well dressed. Formerly, many of them got "that well-dressed feeling" from wearing ready-made dresses which clerks had assured them were becoming and in the latest style. Then came the war. Stocks of ready-made clothes dwindled, and those for sale satisfied neither the salesperson nor the careful buyer. What could be done? As one would expect, a home demonstration agent suggested to the women of her Maryland county that they make more of their own clothes than they had in the past. Such a suggestion brought to light the fact that many sewing machines were idle because of needed repairs; in fact, some had even been buried in the attic as though their days of toil were at an end.

Then the extension worker had the idea of a sewing-machine clinic. She first mentioned it at a council meeting of the representatives of her home demonstration clubs. The council members liked the idea and listened with interest to the ambitious plans for reaching all the women in the county who owned sewing machines. A State specialist in agricultural engineering, who had made a special study of the different types of sewing machines, was to be invited to hold several clinics throughout the county. At these he would teach women how to clean, repair, and care for their machines.

Analyzing the Situation

But before she went too far, the extension worker had to take stock of the situation. She found to her disappointment that the agricultural engineer could spend only 2 days in the county. This meant but two all-day clinics, which would reach only 50 to 60 women. She decided that since the number who could attend had to be limited, they should be representative of the different areas of the county so that they could report back to those who did not attend. This led to a consideration of the different communities she desired to reach and the selection of the women who would be interested in attending.

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She decided to let some of the Home Demonstration Clubs pick the members they wanted to send.

Since no clinic of this sort had ever been held in the county before, the home demonstration agent realized that every step had to be thought out carefully. Only a few of the women who had sewing machines knew even the basic principles of caring for their machines, and most of them when confronted with any difficulty were accustomed to shout "John, John, this old sewing machine doesn't work right. Please come and fix it." And John, enjoying his mastery of what to woman was a mystery, would fix the machine with a wry smile, but would never bother to show his wife just how it was done. There were a few women, too, who did not want to get their hands grimy and oily from "fooling" with the machine.

But underneath all this was the old prejudice the women could not do a mechanical job and need not even try. Then, there was the financial angle. Some projects in the past had not gone over well because the women found they were expected to spend too much money for materials. With the sewing machine clinic it would be different. All a woman had to do was to see that she got her machine to the clinic and pay for whatever parts needed to be replaced. Really, it actually would save the women money, as one woman testified at a clinic: "A repair man told me the other day that it would cost \$15, to get this machine fixed, but now I find that all I need is a part, which costs 9 cents, and I can put it in by myself."

Since the clinic membership would be limited to members of home demonstration clubs, there was no need to devise any appealing ways of advertising the clinic in advance. This could be done at the club meetings, by telephone, and by personal visits. The preliminary analysis of the situation also included a consideration of other agencies in the county that might cooperate in the project. The Red Cross sewing group and the teachers of vocational home economics had interests in common and, as later turned out, were enthusiastic over the clinic idea.

The timing of the campaign, which was also important, depended primarily upon the availability of the Agricultural Engineer, but needed to be done before spring sewing got too far along. Otherwise the sewing machines would not be put to maximum use.

Planning

These, then were some of the things the extension worker took into account before she worked out her final plans. In this case, as with most projects, she cleared ideas and matters of policy with her home demonstration council but assumed the responsibility for making out the plans and executing them. This she did chiefly through personal contact. The plan she set down for the clinic included such matters as time and place of the all-day sessions, publicity details, who could and who could not attend, what each woman was to bring, what the agricultural engineer would have on hand in the way of equipment, and how the day was to be spent.

What Happened

Once the preliminary analysis had been made and the final plan completed, the train of events got under way. Those interested in attending had to be

assigned to one of the clinics. The quota for each clinic had to be attained but not overreached because of the lack of equipment for more than 30 women at a time. "Kibitzers," or those who came to watch rather than participate, had to be ruled out. These were to be working sessions, and the extension worker knew that one learns best by doing. Nor could women bring their husbands, as several wanted to do (one woman actually did). At the last minute some of the women called up to ask if they could be changed to the other meeting a week later. One reason given was "The only date I can get with the hairdresser this week is for the day of the clinic." A firm "No," on the part of the home demonstration agent discouraged any switching of dates, and the women showed up as scheduled.

The first all-day session was held late in March at a school in the northern part of the county; 25 women brought their machines, which were anywhere from 3 to 55 years old. Two teachers of vocational home economics came to take advantage of the instruction. A week later the second all-day session was held in the high school at the county seat. Here, in addition to about 25 farm women, the supervisor of Red Cross sewing and one teacher of vocational home economics with six pupils.

The agricultural engineer had planned the day's program so that people were kept busy. He simply took it for granted that every woman was going to do as he suggested, and trusted that their desire to conform would overcome any hesitancy they might have at tackling something new. When the women arrived, their machines were placed in two rows, and each was equipped with tools and a cleaning pan. The women spent the morning taking their machines down and cleaning each part. They did this step by step with no woman allowed to move ahead faster than the group. Those who finished a step before the rest were asked to read through explanatory mimeographed materials, which were to be taken home as a guide in caring for the machines in the future.

At noon the women had a box luncheon. Several were afraid they would never get their machines together again, some even feeling like the little boy who had surreptitiously explored the secrets of an alarm clock. But they gradually gained confidence as they were shown how easily things fitted back into place. The home demonstration agent and the extension clothing specialist, who were in attendance, moved up and down the rows of machines to spot any trouble needing the attention of the leader. Then sufficient time was spent in learning how to oil the machine and adjust the tension. In fact, the leader gave quite a lecture on the kinds of oil to use, where the machine could be serviced when this was necessary, and some things the women should avoid doing with their machines. After this, the women tried sample stitching. When this was satisfactory, they were allowed to go home.

As a program for their April meeting, each home demonstration club in the county heard a report from someone who had attended the clinic. Some of these speakers brought their machines along to demonstrate to the others how to oil and adjust them properly.

Evaluation of Results

The effectiveness of this program, as far as it has gone, is apparent to all. Inquiries constantly come in to the extension office, "When are we going to have another clinic, so I can learn how to care for my machine?" The greatest enthusiasts are those who participated. All learned something, but more than two-thirds are now able to tear their machines down and investigate any difficulty.

They are often asked by neighbors and relatives to help with an ailing machine. One woman with a special knack in mechanical matters found herself in such demand that she decided to open a repair shop in her house and make reasonable charges for work done. She is the only one in the county now providing such services.

As a result of this clinic, more machines are being used by the women of the county, and furthermore they are being used for longer periods. A machine does not stay idle for months at a time if something goes wrong with it. The project has not yet reached all the women needing and desiring its benefits. They will have to wait until the specialist is available once more, or until some local person acquires the necessary proficiency. This will take time because of the various models represented at any one clinic.

When asked what factors contributed most to the success of the clinic, the home demonstration agent replied:

"First of all, the women who came were interested. They wanted to sew, but their machines needed repair. Then the leadership of the agricultural engineer was excellent. He got all the women in the spirit of the thing, gave them confidence, and expertly corrected any difficulty. He also had the day planned carefully and had prepared instructions which the women could use at home if they forgot something presented at the clinic. And I guess the fact that I gave this my personal attention had something to do with the success. I know the members of the home demonstration clubs very well and was able to exert pressure here and there to get representative people to attend and to keep those who had decided to come from changing their minds. It was also nice to have the Red Cross people and the teachers of vocational home economics cooperate, although they came primarily to learn and did not assume any responsibility for the project as a whole."

From her point of view the project would have been more successful if it had not been limited to such a small proportion of the women of the county. She realizes that some women who could profit from such a clinic would be indifferent because of their attitudes toward mechanical tasks. A few others consider their social position so high that they prefer to pay someone to do a repair job rather than to stoop to doing it themselves. Thus class structure makes its influence felt even in planning for a sewing-machine clinic.

This is not a spectacular story. The economic basis of the county has not been changed, nor have large groups of people been converted to new ways of living. But, as a matter of fact, most extension work is unspectacular when taken case by case, as one must do to understand the processes involved. The spectacular feature is the accumulation of changes which in some dramatic crisis reveal themselves and give the appearance of happening all of a sudden.

This story does show how the behavior of more than 50 women was changed. This, in turn, is affecting the attitudes of other women. The project was necessarily designed for members of home demonstration clubs who owned sewing machines needing repairs. Within these limits and for this special group, all techniques and methods were planned and must be judged.